

Taiwan, July 15-18, 2018

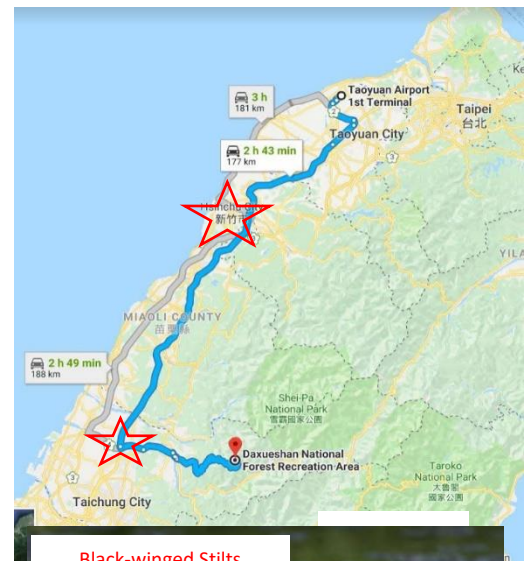
Li and Lisa Li

Birdwatching and photography are very popular in Taiwan. It was relatively easy to find a guide. Our guide, **Richard**, however had plenty warnings for us, summer was hot, migrants had moved on, even residence birds were less active, and oh, it's typhoon season. Still, we decided pushing on. A sweaty birding weekend in Taiwan was still better spent than a sweaty weekend in Houston. At least Taiwan had mountains, so we settled on **Daxueshan Forest Reserve** for cooler weather. Two weeks before our trip, Super Typhoon Maria formed in Pacific Ocean. Though it didn't hit Taiwan directly, the forecast predicted strong wind and heavy rain, which could trigger landslide in mountains. Luckily, the storm made a slightly northward turn, the island was mostly spared from any serious damage.

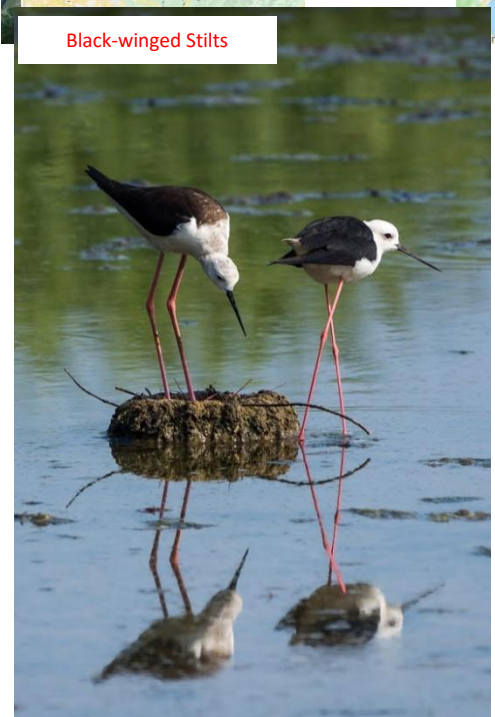
After a smooth overnight flight, we arrived Taoyuan Airport early morning on **July 15**, where we were picked up by Richard. Before we drove to the mountain, Richard brought us to a local wetland (Hsinchu, meaning new bamboo) for some water birds. Arriving around 8AM, it was already hot and humid, and a few locals were there with their cameras and tripods. Taiwanese birders/photographers are well known among other birders for their extravagant equipment. They tend to be more photographers than birders, everyone with big lens, camping out at potential locations to wait for birds. There were quite a few birds around the wetlands. While common, **Black-winged Stilts** were eye pleaser. The more exciting bird of the stop was a **Yellow Bitten**. I actually saw one mid-sized yellow bird flew over as soon as I got out the car, but it disappeared behind the reeds before I could get my binocs on it. Li's good find was a **Common Kingfisher**. Its turquoise blue was glistening in the sun, making it the prettiest bird of the day. Before we left the spot for the walk, the Yellow Bitten also made a return, flew overhead again and we all had a clear view of the bird.

We took a short walk around the wetland, saw a few forest birds, **Black Bulbuls**, **Light-vented Bulbuls**, **Plain Prinia** and **Scaly-breasted Munia**. Before we headed back to the car, I saw a big and dark bird hopping inside a dense tree. Hoping for a Taiwan Magpie, I asked Richard to check it out. Not what I had hoped for, it's a **Treepie** instead. Zipping around were a small flock of **Japanese Whiteeyes**.

Before long, the weather was getting too hot to bird, so we were eager to get in the car with some AC and started our drive to cooler mountain. When Richard stopped by a nearby 7-eleven for some water, Li and I went



Black-winged Stilts



in to survey the local goods. I got a pack of fresh fruits (the mango WAS good), and Li came up to cashier with a big grim, along with a tea egg.

Driving pass rice fields, I asked Richard if we could make a stop or two to try our luck with Rails. Richard zapped that idea with one simple fact, that these fields were heavily polluted by fertilizers, insecticides, and the industrial runoffs from surrounding semi-conductor factories. Though birds don't feed here, we human do consume the agriculture products. In that sense, birds are smart than us humans.

We made a couple of more bird stops along the way. Much of the countryside has been tuned into agriculture land. At a glance, I was puzzled by the look of the landscape, patches of the mountain side ware covered by white flowers. Can't figure out what was the tree, I had to ask Richard. Those were not flowers, rather, white paper bags to cover up the young pears from birds or whatever thieves. By now, I had the hint that this Taiwan stop might not be as good as I had hoped. First, birds weren't responding to calls. Richard did tell us July was the "off" season, but I didn't expect this slow.

Before turning east onto the mountain road, we stopped at the last town (Dongshi) for lunch. The place used to be a logging town, but it has become a tourist stop for mountain-goers. The simple clam soup was the most memorable dish we enjoyed over our 3 day stay.

It was Sunday, so the single lane roadway up to the mountain was pretty crowded. Families parked their cars/SUVs along the roadside, pulling out a shade for picnic. When Richard pulled over at one busy stop, I almost asked him to skip it because it was too crowded. I was glad we didn't. The prized **Swinhoe's Pheasants** and **Taiwan Partridges** had learned to live along with the tourists.



Town of Dongshi,

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Swinhoe's Pheasant

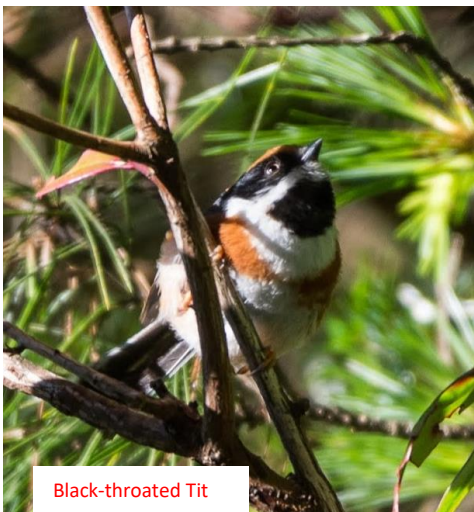


Taiwan Partridge

Though “no feeding” signs were big and clear, in both Chinese and English, locals enjoyed tossing the breadcrumbs. Birds certainly didn’t complain.

Both Li and I were pretty much zombies when we arrived the hostel shortly before 3PM. The huge parking lot was almost full, a mix of tour buses and personal vehicles. As soon as we got the key, Li and I disappeared to our room for some zzzz. We agreed to meet up at 6pm for supper. When the alarm came on at 5:30pm, I told Li that I would rather sleep than eat, so Li went with Richard for meal. I had no idea when Li got back as I slept through until 2AM. Luckily, we packed some instant ramen, so we made tea and I enjoyed a cup of spicy noodle soup.

July 16 6AM We drove upwards along the mountain road. A quick stop along the way found us a flock of **Coal Tits**, **Black-throated Tits**, and **Taiwan Yuhina**. When we reached the top, the parking lot was empty. The view, however, was spectacular, and the crisp cold air was refreshing. It’s indeed an escape from the city’s hassle and bustle. At the garden, **White-whiskered Laughingthrushes** were active and easy to spot. Walking around the garden produced a few more birds, including **Taiwan Rosefinch**. We returned to the hostel for 8AM buffet style breakfast. The cafeteria, the only place served meals in the Reserve, was efficient and adequate. After breakfast, Richard again drove us back to the parking lot and took a walk around Tianchi (means Heavenly Pond, which is actually a small body of dead water). The endemic bird we picked up this time was **Taiwan Bush Warbler**. Unfortunately, I lost the newly published *Birds of Taiwan* book Richard had just given me.



Black-throated Tit



White-whiskered Laughingthrush

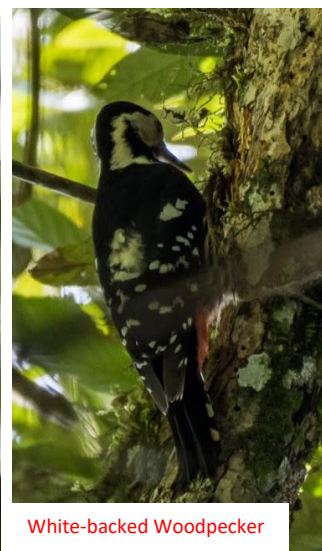
The afternoon birding (after a nap) was still in Daxueshan, but at lower elevation (<2000 msl) around the entrance. The walk along the road was nice and quiet with a lot less cars. At this stretch, the quality of the birds overcame the dismal quantity. When Richard heard **Crested Serpent-Eagle**, we all scanned over the canyon hoping to find it. Didn't find the eagle, I spotted a medium sized black bird far on a dead snag. Based on the perch, I guessed a woodpecker. Handing Li my binoc, I asked Li to check it out. As soon as Li found the bird, he saw a big black bird swooped in and drove the woodpecker away. That was the Eagle. We never got a good look of it, but did see the white-band on the tail when it took off. Then a flock of 4-5 **Rufous-crowned Laughingthrushes** came in to feed. The birds had lots of personalities, colorful and noisy. Then Li and I both heard some faint pecking sound, and I started to search. When I finally found the woodpecker, it was clearly a black and white with rosy belly, **White-backed Woodpecker**. According to Richard, it was really a good find as he hadn't seen this woodpecker for more than 10 years. Satisfied with my find, we started to head down the trail. Before reaching parking lot, a flock of Yohinas flew in to feed. Among Yohinas, I also found a different tit, like our chickadee but with rufous belly, later finding out it was a **Varied Tit**.



White-eared Sibia



Rufous-crowned Laughingthrush



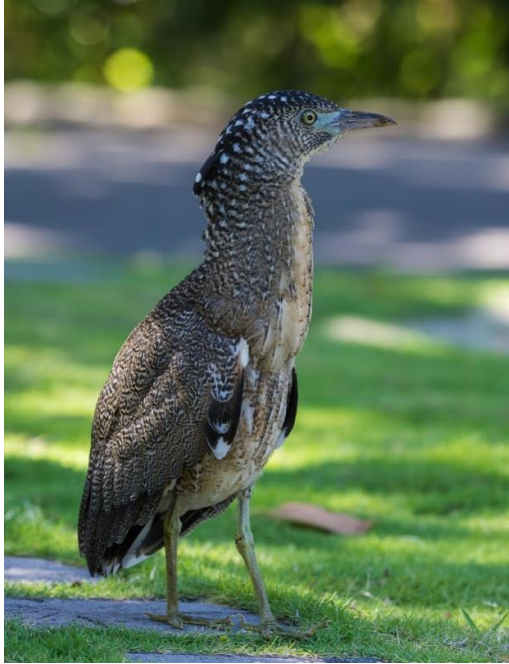
White-backed Woodpecker

We never bothered with owling at night. Li and I tried to hold off our bedtime as much as we could. At 8:30pm, we both passed out.

July 17 We decided to spend the early morning here in the mountain, but would drive down to the city, hoping Botanical Garden stop would reward us Magpies and Barbets. At 6AM we again went up to the upper visit center area. Weather was good though very windy. A little **Yellow-bellied Warbler** was very active picking his breakfast. A bit too active, hopping around the bushes that it was difficult to get a picture. Instead of walking around the pond, we birded on the trail behind the parking lot. There were a few abandoned heavy machineries left in the woods, a reminder of logging days. Thankfully Taiwan government passed the law to protect the remaining forest in 90s. With time, the habitat gradually bounced back. Along this trail we found **Collared Bush-Robins**, **Taiwan Barwings**, and a very cooperative **Ferruginous Flycatcher**, and **Steere's Liocichlas**.

After breakfast we checked out the hostel and started our way down to the city. Birding through the car window, I spotted a large bird circulating overhead during our drive, and we finally got a good clear view of the **Crested Serpent-Eagle**.

We took our time for a slow lunch just outskirts of Taipei, before arriving Botanic Garden before 3pm. It was hot and humid, just as bad as Houston. Luckily, there were plenty of shade. Birds were feeling the heat too and weren't active. We did see a few **Malayan Night-Herons**, along with Bulbuls. The garden was not that big, less than an hour in, we were back at the entrance already. Li wanted to call it a quit to get out the heat, but I was stubborn and wanted to find Magpie and Barbet, so we circled around the path for the second time. We didn't find any Magpie, which should have been an easy bird. I did find **Taiwan Barbets**, and they were indeed beautiful birds.



Besides birds, there was also a cultural landmark in the Garden. We walked pass an old building, marked with a sign 欽差行臺 (Imperial Envoy's Mansion). Richard explained to Li (I was too busy looking for birds), that the building was authentic from Qing Dynasty, but it's not at its original location. When its original site needed to be cleared for new construction, the building was taken apart, relocated to the Botanical Garden and reconstructed piece by piece.



After Botanic garden, Richard drove us to Novotel near Taoyuan Airport, and concluded our guided trip. Exhausted from the heat and jet leg, Li and I had a simple dinner at the hotel.

July 18 6:30AM Hotel shuttle took us to the airport for our Jakarta flight. The flight was delayed by 30 minutes, which didn't bother us at all as we had more than 8 hours layover

Afterthoughts

We saw 52 species of birds over 3 days in Taiwan, which was not bad for low season. Richard had done a good job finding us many endemic birds. Our overall impression of Taiwan is very positive, that people are polite and friendly. Though the island is heavily populated and city is crowded, most things run smoothly and orderly. Above all, both the government and people recognize the need for conservation and preservation, making the island a wonderful place for birdwatchers and other natural lovers. Unlike many other places we have visited, the island has a very modest population growth rate (0.29%, comparing to Madagascar's 2.71%), which projects a positive future for the remaining forest and environment.

We shall return some day to visit the rest of the island. Fairy Pitta itself is worth a trip there.

[Richard's website](#) and email (info@birdingattaiwan.com).